Rules of the Game
Actions (Part Three)
By Skip Williams

This week, we examine a selection of standard and move actions and how they affect play.

Standard Actions

As noted in Part One, you can use a standard action and still have time for a move action as well. You can substitute a move action for a standard action, but not vice versa. You can use only one standard action each round, and you can't use any standard action if you use a full-round action.
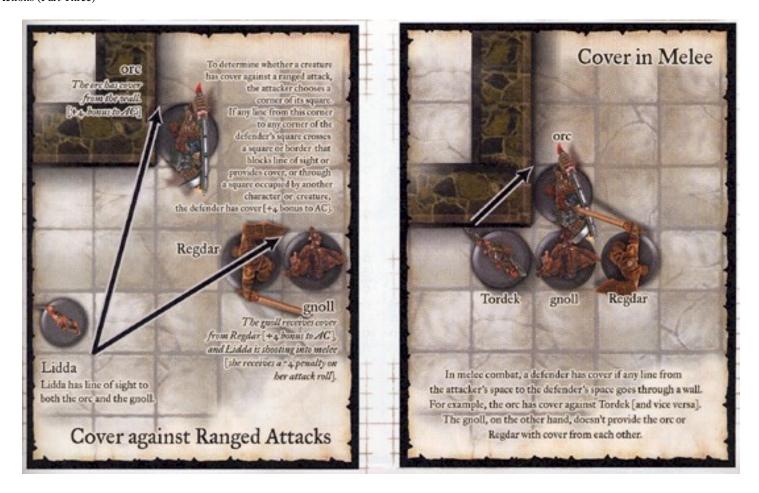
Attack: Use this action to make a single melee or ranged attack. (Some feats, such as Manyshot , allow you to make more than one attack with a standard action.) If your base attack bonus allows you to make multiple attacks during your turn, or if you wield two weapons, you need to use the full-attack action (a full-round action) to make the multiple attacks.

To make a melee attack, your target must be within reach (usually adjacent to you if you're a Medium creature). To make a ranged attack, your target must be within range. You must have line of effect (at least one unbroken, straight, line from any corner of your space to any corner of your target's space) to make a melee or ranged attack. If one or more of those lines is blocked, your target has cover against your attack. If you're making a melee attack, your target has cover if any line between any corner of your square and any corner of your target's square is blocked. If you're making a ranged attack, pick any corner of your square. Your target has cover only if any line connecting that corner with any corner of the target's space is blocked.

From PH pg 150: "Cover: One of the best defenses available is cover. By taking cover behind a tree, a wall, the side of a wagon, or the battlements of a castle, you can protect yourself from attacks, especially ranged attacks, and also from being spotted. To determine whether your target has cover from your ranged attack, choose a corner of your square. If any line from this corner to any corner of the target's square passes through a square or border that blocks line of effect or provides cover, or through a square occupied by a creature, the target has cover (+4 to AC)."

Remember that a natural 1 (the d20 comes up 1) on the attack roll is always a miss, no matter what your attack bonus or what your target's Armor Class. A natural 20 (the d20 comes up 20) is always a hit, provided that you have line of effect to your target and your target is in reach (for a melee attack) or range (for a ranged attack).

To determine whether a creature has cover against a ranged attack, the attacker chooses a corner of its square. If any line from this corner to any corner of the defender's square crosses a square or border that blocks line of sight or provides cover, or through a square occupied by another character or creature, the defender has cover [+4 bonus to AC].

The orc has cover from the wall. [+4 bonus to AC]

The gnoll receives cover from Regdar [+4 bonus to AC], and Lidda is shooting into melee [she receives a -4 penalty on her attack roll].

Lidda has line of sight to both the orc and the gnoll.

Cover against Ranged Attacks

Cover in Melee

In melee combat, a defender has cover if any line from the attacker's space to the defender's space goes through a wall. For example, the orc has cover against Tordek [and vice versa]. The gnoll, on the other hand, doesn't provide the orc or Regdar with cover from each other.

If you make a ranged attack at a target engaged in melee with a character friendly to you, you take a -4 penalty on your attack roll. Two creatures are engaged in melee if they are enemies of each other and either threatens the other. In this case, it's best to assume one creature threatens the other if it can make an armed or an unarmed melee attack against the other. (As noted earlier, you must be able to make an armed melee attack into a space to threaten that space.) A creature that cannot make any attacks is not considered engaged unless a foe is actually attacking it. In this case, a creature is being attacked when a foe has attacked during the current or previous round.

If you have the Precise Shot feat, you can shoot or throw into a melee without the -4 penalty.

If your target (or the part of the target you're aiming at, if it's a big target) is at least 10 feet away from the nearest friendly character, you can avoid the -4 penalty, even if the creature you're aiming at is engaged in melee with a friendly character. That's because you can easily aim your shot to avoid hitting your ally.

If your attack succeeds, you deal damage and might inflict a critical hit as noted on page 139 in the *Player's Handbook.*

As a nonaction while attacking, you can choose to fight defensively as noted on page 140 in the *Player's Handbook.*

Making an armed melee attack doesn't provoke attacks of opportunity. An unarmed melee attack provokes an attack of opportunity from your target if the target is armed. (A character could be considered armed even when she attacks without a weapon; see page 139 in the *Player's Handbook.*) A ranged attack provokes an attack of opportunity from every foe that threatens you when you make the attack.

Cast a Spell: Most spells require one standard action to cast. To cast any spell, you must provide any components the spell requires. See *Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions* for details. Casting a spell usually provokes an attack of opportunity from every foe that threatens you when you cast.

As a nonaction, you can make a Concentration check to cast a spell defensively. Doing so allows you to cast the spell without provoking attacks of opportunity, but you must succeed at the Concentration check (DC 15 + spell level) or lose the spell. Other conditions, such as poor weather, continuing damage, or hostile spells also can break your concentration; see the Concentration skill description in the *Player's Handbook* for details.

If you cast a spell with a range of touch, you can touch one recipient as a nonaction that's part of the action you used to cast the spell. You also can opt to hold the charge for a spell with touch range. Though you can lose the charge by accident, you must use a standard action to deliver the spell where you want it. As a full-round action, you can touch up to six friends with a touch spell, but that's worthwhile with only a few spells. See *Rules of the Game: Reading Spell Descriptions* for details.

Concentrate to Maintain a Spell: Some spells require continued concentration to keep them going. Concentrating to maintain a spell doesn't provoke an attack of opportunity, but anything that could break your concentration when casting a spell can keep you from concentrating to maintain a spell. If your concentration breaks, the spell ends.

Sometimes, you'll need to perform some other action to get the benefit from your spell. In most cases this is a nonaction that's part of the standard action you use to concentrate on the spell; an example is making a Spellcraft check to determine the school of a magical aura you've discovered with a *detect magic* spell.

Activate a Magic Item: Many magic items don't need to be activated, either because they work continuously or activate on their own when you use them; see *Rules of the Game: Using Magic Items*. You use a standard action to activate most items that require activation. As noted in Part One, making a Use Magic Device skill check to help activate magic item is a nonaction you use as part of activating the item.

Use Special Ability: Using a special ability is usually a standard action, but whether it is a standard action, a full-round action, or not an action at all is defined by the ability.

A spell-like ability requires a standard action that provokes an attack of opportunity; see *Rules of the Game: All About Spell-Like Abilities* for details.

A supernatural ability usually requires a standard action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity, though sometimes using a supernatural ability is a nonaction or simply works when the user takes some other action. For example, energy drain works when the user makes a successful slam (or incorporeal touch) attack.

Using an extraordinary ability is usually not an action because most extraordinary abilities automatically happen when the user takes some other action. Those extraordinary abilities that are actions are usually standard actions that cannot be disrupted, do not require concentration, and do not provoke attacks of opportunity.

Total Defense: This standard action gives you a dodge bonus to your Armor Class for 1 round; see page 142 in the *Player's Handbook* for details. The bonus lasts from the moment you declare the total defense action until the beginning of your next turn. You can use a move action either before or after you declare the action, but you're

better off if you declare the action, then use a move action (because you get the benefit of total defense against any attacks of opportunity provoked by your move action).

Start or Complete a Full-Round Action: This standard action lets you start a full-round action and finish it the following round by using another standard action. You can't use this action to start or complete a full attack, charge, run, or withdraw. You can use this action to begin or complete a spell with a full-round casting time, to perform a coup de grace, or to begin or complete moving 5 feet through difficult terrain (see *Rules of the Game: All About Movement*. As with any other standard action, you can use

> From PH pg 142: "Total Defense: You can defend yourself as a standard action. You get a +4 dodge bonus to your AC for 1 round. Your AC improves at the start of this action, so it helps you against any attacks of opportunity you incur during the round. You can't combine total defense with fighting defensively or with the benefit of the Combat Expertise feat (since both of those require you to declare an attack or full attack). You can't make attacks of opportunity while using total defense."

a move action either before or after starting or completing the full-round action (provided you have both a standard action and move action available during your turn). If you use this action to start a full-round action and fail to use another standard action to complete the full-round during the following turn, your previous standard action is wasted.

Move Actions

As noted in Part One, a move action either moves you across the battlefield a distance equal to your speed (or less) or is something that takes a similar amount of time.

As noted earlier, you can substitute a move action for a standard action, but not vice versa. This allows you to use one or two move actions each round.

Leaving a threatened space using a move action provokes an attack of opportunity, though there are ways to avoid triggering an attack of opportunity, such as using the Tumble skill.

Move: You use this action to move up to your speed. If you choose to travel across the battlefield at less than your speed, you still use up a whole move action. This helps simplify play.

Accelerated Climbing: You can climb up to one-half your speed as a move action by accepting a -5 penalty on your Climb check. All the normal risks and penalties involved in climbing apply to acceleratedclimbing; see the Climb skill description in the *Player's Handbook.*

Crawling: You can crawl 5 feet as a move action. Crawling incurs attacks of opportunity from any attackers who threaten you at any point of your crawl. This means that you trigger an attack of opportunity when you enter or leave a threatened space by crawling.

Drawing or Sheathing a Weapon: Drawing a weapon so that you can use it in combat, or putting it away so that you have a free hand, usually is a move action. If you have a base attack bonus of +1 or higher, drawing (but not sheathing) a weapon is a nonaction that you can take along with a regular move (that is, a move action that you use to move up to your speed across the battlefield). If you have the Two-Weapon Fighting feat, you can draw two weapons (either light or one-handed weapons) either as a move action or as a nonaction along with a regular move.

The draw a weapon action (and nonaction) also applies to weaponlike objects carried in easy reach. The rules

don't give much guidance about which objects are "weaponlike," other than to use a wand as an example. As a practical matter, I suggest treating any object that is no bigger than a weapon for the character as weaponlike for this purpose. To be retrieved as a weapon, the weaponlike object also has to be stored in some convenient place, such as a sheath or loop in a belt or on some kind of harness or bandoleer.

Drawing ammunition for use with a ranged weapon (such as arrows, bolts, sling bullets, or shuriken) is a free action.

The Quick Draw feat allows you to draw (but not sheathe) a weapon as a free action during your turn. If you also have the Two-Weapon Fighting feat, you can draw two weapons as a free action during your turn. Though the rules don't say so, it is reasonable to assume that you also can use Quick Draw to draw weaponlike objects.

Readying or Loosing a Shield: Strapping a shield to your arm to gain its shield bonus to your Armor Class is a move action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity. The rules don't specifically say so, but to ready a shield as a move action you must carry it on your person (perhaps strapped to your back). If you pick up a shield off the ground, that takes a separate move action that provokes an attack of opportunity.

Unstrapping and dropping a shield so you can use your shield hand for another purpose requires a move action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity (to unstrap it) and a free action (to drop it). You also can merely loose the shield and keep it on your person, usually by slinging it over your back by a strap.

If you have a base attack bonus of +1 or higher, you can ready or loose a shield as a free action combined with a regular move.

Manipulating an Item: Moving, lifting, storing, retrieving, or otherwise handling an item is a move action. See Table 8-2 in the *Player's Handbook* for variations on this action and which variations provoke attacks of opportunity.

Directing an Existing Spell: Some spells, such as *flaming sphere,* allow you to redirect the effect to new targets or areas while the spell lasts. Directing a spell requires a move action and does not provoke attacks of opportunity or require concentration.

Standing Up: When you're prone (lying down), standing up requires a move action and provokes attacks of opportunity. See *Rules of the Game: All About Movement* for variations on standing up.

Mounting or Dismounting a Steed: You can mount or get off a steed no more than one size category bigger than you as a move action that does not provoke an attack of opportunity. With a DC 20 Ride check, you can mount or dismount a steed no more than one size category bigger than you as a free action, provided that you have at least one move action available to you during the current turn at the time you attempt the mount or dismount. For example, if you ride your mount for a double move, you've exhausted your move actions for the round and cannot dismount during the same round, even with a Ride check. See the Ride skill description in the *Player's Handbook* or *Rules of the Game: All About Movement* for more on mounting and dismounting.

What's Next?

That's all the time we have this week. Next week, we'll consider full-round actions and a few special actions and how they work in play.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon* *Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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